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ABSTRACT

This article discusses factors affecting parents in contemporary Europe. The focus is on family development, mechanisms conditioning social and family interactions, and the historical processes that are resulting in changes in family structure. Family changes discussed include the declining birthrate, structural conditions for parenthood, changing demographics due to rising life expectancy, marital status, women's changing self-concept, parents' concepts of education, and living conditions of families--especially those in poverty. The article considers the effects of changing structural and economic conditions families face due to changing lifestyles, immigration patterns, and social upheaval. The article also examines the restriction of childrearing to the family and related concerns such as professional concern with child care and education, civil and protective rights for children, media images of the family, gender roles and childrearing, father's involvement in parenting, and new understanding of children's coping during social upheaval. (JPB)

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ED 423 074

New parenting challenges in Europe today

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There is hardly any topic, which has been discussed so intensively during the last few years as the topic of parenthood. Current research results have been documented in the "Handbook of Parenting" in four volumes, edited by Marc A. Bornstein (1995). Historical, demographic, economic, sociological and family psychological studies in particular have been concerned with this topic in the past 25 years. At the end of this century parenthood has also become a political topic of interest. The continuous interest, which society and politics take in this topic, is reflected by a number of conferences, of law reforms, of model studies and of initiatives in this field, such as the European conference of the Ministers of Youth and Family in 1955 or activities of the European Council and conferences on the role of the father in Copenhagen and in Italy. All of these activities give evidence of a growing interest in the processes of change connected with parenthood. The increasing interest in parenthood and the mechanisms regulating the parent-child-relationship also suggests a change of perspective: It is not family forms that are the focus of interest but it is family development and mechanisms conditioning our interactions.

It was only recently that historians have started to analyse the achievements of women outside the family and the achievements of men within the family. In the course of time the roles of parents and their parental responsibilities have been shaped in interdependence with cultural expectations, economic conditions and historical events. This is exemplified by the historian Mintz (1997) by the role of the father in American history. Thus parenthood has always been shaped by the historical process of change. To put it differently: from a social constructivist point of view parenthood is not only or predominantly the result of biological imperatives or genetic predispositions. Childcare, education and socialication of children are social processes which are dynamic and open in their results. Abilities like caring for other people and empathy, are being developed by learning, although they are part of human nature. Parent-child-relationships are established and maintained by social interaction. Relationships and experien-

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ce are subject to interpretations and importance is attached to them (e.g. Arrendell, 1997; Atwood & Ruiz 1993; Gubrium & Holstein 1990). According to this perspective interpretations continuously undergo revaluations and redefinitions. This dynamical process and the changing character of meanings also applies for family relationships(and as a consequence for parenthood).

As Arendell works out in her latest book of 1997 "Contemporary Parenting" parenthood is dependent on space and time and does not occur in a social vacuum, but it is rather integrally connected with and shaped by demographic changes, historical events and patterns, cultural norms and values, social structure, family development and arrangements and changes in the social organization and structure.

Historically, there has been a revolution within the family in Europe in the last three centuries, which has ousted the father from his central role to the periphery of the family system. The father-child-relationship as the central dimension of the family system has gradually been replaced by the mother-child-relationship for economic and cultural reasons. This development has accelerated since the middle of the last century.

On the verge of the next millenium there have been remarkable attempts to revaluate parental roles and responsibilities and to involve fathers more strongly in the family and to integrate mothers in the work process to a higher degree.

In Europe, the third largest bloc of countries, parenthood currently meets with demographic and societal conditions, which have changed dramatically. With an average birth rate of 1.45 children per woman Europe ranks very low on an international scale. Internationally, it is twice as high and in Africa it is even 5.7 children per woman. Greece ranks very low on the European fertility scale with 1.36 children per woman after Italy (1.25). At the same time a rise in average life expectancy for men and women in Europe has been observed, which is 11 years for Portuguese women and 8 years for Greek women.

The structural conditions for parenthood in Europe have also changed tremendously in the last 25 years. The importance of marriage as a prerequisite for parenthood has dwindled enormously. With the exception of the years 1985- 1990 there has been a continous decline of the marriage rate in Europe. In 1994 it ranged at 2 per 1000. It is interesting that in this context Greece has a leading position. In countries with a lower marriage rate such as Sweden, France and Finland

a stabilization on a low level can be observed. Since the beginning of the Eighties sociologists have noticed a disengagement of marriage and parenthood all over Europe. However, Europe does not present itself as a uniform entity: The number of children born out of wedlock varies tremendously: it is 58% in Iceland, 49,5% in Sweden, 46,5% in Denmark and only below 3% in Greece. Irrespective of the varying percentage there is evidence of an increasing tendency of the proportion of children born out of wedlock. Studies concerned with the development of parenthood make it clear that these children will only partly grow up with both natural parents in the same household. According to a survey of the German Youth Insitute (DJI) in Germany only 44% of these children will experience their parents' divorce. For a lot of children the natural father will be substituted by a social one. This development is paralleled by a growing number of women and men, who do not have children and for whom parenthood will not be a life's task.

Rising life expectancy and declining birth rates are currently leading to a demographic development in Europe characterized by a rising vertical and a falling horizontal complexity. From a family biographical point of view there are changes which lead to an increasing discontinuity in the family developmental process. This problem can be exemplified very well by analyzing separation, divorce and remarriage. In Europe every third marriage ends in divorce. Generally, one can differentiate between three different regions in Europe: the divorce rate in the Mediterranean countries is 10-20 percent, in the Central European countries it amounts to 30-40 % and in Northern Europe about 40-50% of all marriages are divorced. In more than 50% of all cases parenthood is affected by divorce. Divorce, separation, single parenthood, remarriage and renewed divorce represent phases in the family development which confront parents with special challenges. In contrast to the USA the impact of divorce on children has so far been only insufficiently studied in Europe. Although one-parent families are not a new sociological phenomenon, its causes have changed. While in former times a parent's death or a child's birth out of wedlock predominantly accounted for this form of family, today divorce and separation are the main reasons for the existence of one-parent families. Today parenthood occurs in a variety of familial arrangements, e.g. with single mothers or couples of the same sex. Grandparents, adoptive parents and stepparents are also involved in childcare. During the last few years this occurrence of different settings of parenthood has been accompanied by a polarization of parents' developmental stage, especially with regard to fathers: the

phenomenon of teenage parents and of late fathers, i.e. those becoming fathers after the age of 45, is on the increase in Europe and there are already the first few studies about this topic. Parental experience and challenges vary in different ways and to a different extent depending on the arrangement of parenthood. Particularly as far as fathers are concerned, there has been a strong polarization in the last 25 years: While more and more fathers are involved in childcare, others retreat from their parental responsibilities or have been separated from their children due to measures of family law. Never before such a great number of fathers have been separated from their children as in the last 25 years.

In recent years the remarriage of divorced parents has led to an increase in the percentage of step-families. This has resulted in family relations which have been unknown up to now. "Mulit-parent-families" which have so to speak "many parents" have come into existence, in which complicated new degrees of relationships can be found, for which we even do not have adequate vocabulary (Furstenberg, 1987).

Not only the structural aspects of family development are changing but the current situation of families has led to a shift in the self-concept of partners, in the educational aims of parents and in the parent-child-relationship.

First of all women have a new self-concept. The most striking indicator of this change is the rise in female employment. Today women do not exclusively define themselves in terms of partnership and motherhood, but they attempt to integrate their job and their family. Single parents and women between the age of 20 and 35 are especially affected by the increase of female employment. In contrast to fathers mothers hereby apply a concept of synergy, i.e. they put their jobs to the test of compatibility with their parental responsibilities. On the other hand, men apply a segmental concept.

Concerning parents' concepts of education, studies conducted in the Eighties report on changes in educational aims. There appears to be a decline of educational aims stressing conventionality and conformity; educational aims tend to be orientated towards individuality and critical autonomy, i.e. "values of acceptance and duty", such as obedience and submission have been replaced by values concerning "self-expectation", such as autonomy and independence (Schneewind, 1991; Schneewind & Ruppert 1995).

Beside this notable change in educational aims there have also been changes in the parent-child relationship. In the EU-countries children have almost entirely lost their economic and socio-normative function and have assumed first and foremost a psychological function by giving meaning to their parents' lives. This topic was extensively discussed in the panels yesterday. The different meaning children have for their parents nowadays has also had its effects on the parent-child-relationship. As parents give more consideration to their children's demands of autonomy, the parent-child-relationship is taking on more and more the quality of living together as partners. The educational relationship has developed into an interactional relationship, which leads on the one hand to a more child-centered situation and on the other hand to a weakening of the partner system (Schütze 1989).

The "Handbook of Parenting" already mentioned before is also concerned with additional strains of parenthood, such as problems of structural violence against women and children, the imbalance of power between the two sexes, the effects of unemployment on family members and problems such as child abuse, child neglect and sexual abuse of children. A lot of European countries have been deeply affected by these problems during the last years, but time does not permit to expand on this topic now.

The living conditions of families and children have not only changed to a high extent on the family level, but also on other levels of the system. Children and women bear the brunt of the still unsolved problem of the incompatibility of family and job and consequently, this affects parental responsibilities of mothers and fathers. The consequences of poverty and its effects on children have repeatedly been pointed out during the last years (Huston, 1991). At a conference in Newcastle Upon Tyne last year Dalton of the University of Bristol presented interesting results concerning the impact of poverty on parenthood and the development of children. Experts agree that the type of family form is predicative of children's material situtation. While more than half of the children (54%) who live with their single mother are poor, only every sixth child (12%) living in a married two-parent-family is affected by poverty. Households of single mothers are five times more likely to be affected by poverty than married families (35,6% vs. 6,5%).

Social support cannot meet the needs of poor families. Compared with children of families with a higher income, poor children are 50% more likely to drop out of school without a degree, they are less

successful at school, they suffer from different serious physical and mental diseases and they are more frequently involved in severe accidents. Strains and uncertainties in every-day life are generally bigger for families who do not have adequate financial means at their disposal. Poverty is an additional stress factor for parenthood and prevents access to necessary ressources.

Problems of social exclusion of children and their families have recently been discussed on a European level.

Other societal, and particularly economic changes on a big scale will have immediate effects on families and the education of children. Although the political changes in Middle and Eastern European countries have not led to extensive migration into EU-countries, there has been a significant flux of immigration into Germany. In this context it is an interesting development that former emigration countries such as Italy, Greece and Spain have recently turned into immigration countries. All over Europe bi-national marriages are on the increase. During the last 35 years this type of marriage rose from 5.0% to 16.5%.

As a result of these changing structural and economic conditions families face increased geographical mobility and a new cultural and linguistic diversity. Consequently, this will lead to a restructuring of the social networks and to further changes in the lives of families. Judging from recent developments, the space of living and working will be extended in the future.

Against this background one can design a scenario for families which is characterized by a pluralization of life styles, by discontinuity in their family development and by the need to cope with strains resulting from normative and non-normative biographical events combined with an increasing individualisation of family biographies. Geographical mobility, linguistic and cultural diversity and the reorganisation of social networks are further aspects of family life, which have become rather complex in our world at present. Families, and especially children, will have to integrate a much higher extent of discontinuity into their lives as well as an increasing number of normatively- or non-normatively-related transitions at an individual and at a family level.

The trend of such a development can be traced back to the end of the previous century. This means that such social developments do not represent totally new insights from the point of view of a progressing

process of individualisation and pluralization. But what is new, I think, is the rapidity with which this process has progressed since the beginning of the Eighties. This gives rise to new problems of coping with this development. This process (accelerated by new information and communication networks) releases individuals gradually from orders or patterns of orientation and patterns of life course which seemed to be stable. It also confronts individuals with problems of social regulation. An important question for all of us today is how parenthood is to be organized in a world becoming less predictable and in a family system which is more and more characterized by fragmentations and transitions. In other terms, families have to integrate more discontinuities into their lives and have to cope with the requirements resulting from them, a situation which especially affects parenthood.

Parenting and the family

In most European countries and also worldwide parenting remains restricted to the family, even if the family as an instituition is currently undergoing significant processes of change and adaptation. Although a lot of traditional functions of the family have been transferred from the household into the economic context, as for example the current supply of childcare arrangements, childcare has become a more specialized familial activity all the same. So today, almost all children are looked after by their natural mothers and a majority of children lives during its early childhood together with his father at least for some time in spite of divorce, maternal custody and extramarital births. And even though a growing number of children spend a great bulk of their time outside the family in daycare arrangements and in school, most childcare and educational acitivities are still implemented by the family. Family is the place where children establish primary emotional attachments and develop their identities and their social selves. So today, the social context in which adults start families and raise their children differs enormously from the situation 100 years ago. The same applies for children's and adults' activities. About 100 years ago the majority of families lived on farms and in small communities and their children were involved in economically productive and educational activities. As we learned yesterday, the former role of children as persons who contribute productively to the family was substituted by a role, which implies longer periods of dependency and more formal education for children. As a result of changing living conditions, definitions and activities of childhood, the meaning and the acitivities of parenthood have changed

in the course of time. Besides, the historical tradition that child-parent-relationships are a reciprocal process, which means that as adults children have to take care of their elderly parents belongs to the past, mainly because a social insurance system has been established.

Along with these social changes the meaning of childhood has changed. While the economic importance of children has declined, children have gradually gained an increasing emotional meaning for their parents. Due to the new strains families are exposed to today, this change is past its climax now. Besides, children and parents spend less time together in direct interactions than in the past as a consequence of mothers' employment and the insufficient involvement of fathers in childcare and education regardless of the fact whether they live with the family or in a separate household. Parents themselves contribute to this relative disengagement by demanding a continously increasing level of autonomy and independence. A new form of parenting implies supportive disengagement, which represents an adaptive and functional strategy according to Demo (1992).

Nowadays not only parents but also professionals are concerned with childcare and education. Today we know more about the details of children's development on the physical, social, psychic and cognitive level. Parenthood has become a field for professional intervention and instruction. This development becomes evident by the numerous extrafamilial daycare arrangements which have come into existence in France, Denmark and in the Scandinavian countries. In Germany all children from age 3 to 6 are entitled to attend kindergarten since a pertinent law was passed in 1996.

The number of fundamental civil and protective rights for children is slowly but continuously increasing. Since the ratification of the UN-Convention on the rights of the child there is a tendency to codify children's rights in the law systems of numerous European countries such as for example the Charter on the Rights of Children passed by the European Council and a number of projects aiming at a revaluation of childhood in family and society. Morgan (1995), a social theory researcher thinks that growing intervention in family matters by the state has been caused by the interrelated crises of Western capitalism and the social welfare state. The state tries to minimize the negative impact of the collapse of traditional institutions, communities and economic cycles by its social policy. Due to this extension of state authority parents have to face new and comprehensive responsibilities and at the same time they are losing authority in regard to

their children. In fields formerly defined as exclusive family matters like health care, education, children's occupations, discipline and punishment parents are now confronted with restrictions in their decision making process. According to a theory Therborn derived from his comparative studies, children are currently gaining new rights, whereas parents meet with more and more restrictions and cannot exert their authority at their own discretion, which also includes the question of disciplining their children. Therborn maintains that private patriarchal authority will generally decrease, as it is already the case in Scandinavian countries, and more alternatives of different parenting and parent-child-relationships will be opened up. Compared with the last five decades, today television and modern communication technologies play a more important role in almost all families. I cannot go into detail here, but I should like to point out that parents have to compete more and more with these media in their attempts to convey special values to children. There has been a rather controversial discussion on the influence of TV programmes and commercials on children, but nevertheless, it has become evident that the more frequently and regularly children watch TV, the more they cling to traditional sex role clichés, the more they are aggressive and ask for the products they have seen in the commercials. Children who frequently watch TV have more social relationships of low quality, they have less interpersonal interactions and perform worse at school. Additionally, these children are less healthy, eat more snacks and are overweight. To mention the positive aspects of television: children learn new facts by TV programmes, are less prejudiced and can strengthen their interpersonal abilities by watching certain programmes.

However, TV programmes and commercials often present stereotypes, especially of minorities, women and elderly people. Aggression and violence, material enjoyments, sexual activity and quick gratification are emphasized on television to a disproportionately high degree. Small children who are less experienced in differentiating between messages and pictures are most susceptible to these suggestions. Parents have to decide to what extent television and videos should influence their family life. Usually parents do not adequately supervise their children's habits of watching television and their own habits are mirrored in their children's. In Europe over the last 150 years family has been conceptualized as a private sphere with values, aims and norms differing from the public sphere. This ideology conceiving family as a private, autonomous and self-sufficient entity has been fundamentally criticized by feminists and scientists, who made it clear that family and other social institutions are insolubly bound up. Yet

the traditional perspective of the family still prevails and is supported by the public and a few scientists, who accept it as a basic premise of their conceptual models.

There are also other cultural tenets suggesting that the existence of a universal regular family and familial harmony is biologically determined. They also maintain that socialization only progresses in one direction, that is from parent to child, and that the family of the past was stable and harmonious. Typically, these assumptions are based on the doctrine of the existence of two separate spheres: the public and the private one. Feminists and critical theoretical researchers have disclosed and illustrated how these tenets conceal the dynamic aspects of family life. Hochschild's latest work (1997) raises doubts about such conventional definitions, especially with regard to the alleged dualism between family and the free market system and between the welfare system and individualism. The rigidity with which traditional ideologies are defended has led to a lot of national debates on the state of the family and on the numerous cultural contradictions about families and their different forms. There is still a controversial discussion on values such as independence versus duty, competition versus cooperation, autonomy versus intimacy, utilitarian individualism versus love and obligation versus freedom. Right now Western culture seems to undergo some fundamental transformations, which might be as radical as the transition from the Medieval Ages to modern society, but which is nevertheless incomprehensible (Flax, 1987). Parenthood is not immune to these conflicts and contradictions within a culture.

All over Europe parenting is predominantly a task carried out by mothers. The fact that the bulk of childcare is still performed by mothers makes it clear that the sex-related hierachy has not been overcome yet. Other phenomena like unequal professional opportunities, differences in salaries and wages, the disproportionate representation of women in politics and the double burden of job and family also reveal that there is still a sex-related structure.

Nowadays mothers combine their traditional domestic and parental roles with their jobs. Female employment has tripled during the last 30 years and about two thirds of all mothers with children and more than half of all mothers with infants are working. But at home there have been only little changes. Men have increased their involvement in household chores and childcare from 20% to 30 %, and women do less household work because of their employment, but the situation is still disproportionate. Generally, women are discontent with their

husbands' involvement in household work and childcare, whereas there is hardly any or no dissatisfaction on the men's side. Women want their husbands to become more involved in parenting than they are now. Women's dissatisfaction resulting from this situation also affects the quality of their partnership, as the LBS-Family-Study has proved.

Unequal role distribution in family life and mothers' predominant role in parenting is also an important reason for the fact that it is usually mothers who get custody in case of divorce. However, we are now witnessing a decisive new trend in the family law system: now there are attempts to ensure that parental responsibilites remain a joint task even after separation and divorce.

Inequality of the sexes perpetuates the traditions of patriarchy and provides children with a model of inequality rather than with a model preparing them for more equality in relationships.

Inspite of inequality and the fact that the majority of women earns less than men, female employment is on the way to change the dynamics of marriage and the imbalance of powers.

Sex-related socialization represents a challenge for today's parents. Due to the fact that currently women carry out the bulk of parenting and childcare tasks children are being socialized in terms of sex-related identities, that means they are learning to assume more or less conventional sex roles including future parent roles. So children are participating in a culture organized according to sex-related guidelines. This environment perpetuates an ideology emphasizing the sexual differences, such as women's "innate" ability of caring for other people. Also children raised by lesbian and gay parents who are usually more open-minded in terms of sex roles and sexuality, are influenced by the sexual structure and heterosexually-centered view of our society. Even parents trying to avoid sex role clichés in their education have to come to terms with these cultural constraints.

In spite of all these contradictions and the deplorable state of fathers' involvement in household and childcare tasks there are new studies giving empirical evidence of the significance of **both** parents for their children's medium- and long-term development. In their study "Growing up in Canada" Sarah Landy and Kwok Kwan Tam (1996) report on correlations between parenting and children's developmental progress. They have found that parenting affects most strongly the field of social interactions. Children whose parents have an authoritative

style and have positive interactions with their children have positive interactions with their peers. Children have worse scores regarding their social interactions, if they are exposed to hostile, ineffective and aversive parenting. Another most interesting result of this study is that positive interaction between parents and children acts as a protective factor for high-risk children. The influence of positive interactions is so significant, that the average scores of children of high-risk families equalled the scores of children of non-risk families with positive parenting.

In their book "A generation at risk. Growing up in an era of family upheaval" published in 1997, Paul Amato and Allan Booth have discussed the connections between structural and qualitative aspects of family life on the one hand and the medium-term development of children and youths on the other hand. Their results are based on an analysis of longitudinal dates collected from two generation: firstly, from information on family features provided by parents in 1980 and secondly from reports by their grown-up children on their own lives during the years of 1992 to 1995. Amato and Booth try to give a prognosis on the features of the following generations' lives in view of the structural and qualitative of family relationships. They found that both structural and interactional familial characteristics have a direct impact on the lives of young adults and their achievements. In 1996 Paul Amato presented at Penn State University the results of a special analysis of the data, which he had compiled, with the intention of finding out whether mother and father each make a specific contribution to the development of young adults. Both parents make common contributions to all the 6 features recorded. However, the variables of fathers are more likely to predict education, self-esteem and the occurrence of maladjustments than the variables of mothers. On the other hand, the quality of the child-parent-relationship and the child's relationship with its peers can be predicted by the variables of mothers. Both parents play an equally important role for their children's life satisfaction.

It is of major importance for the future of European societies, as of any society, that children develop into sound, productive and competent members of society. The knowledge of processes and factors favouring a positive and sound development of our children has gained importance in research during the last years. Related problems have been studied empirically, especially regarding those children struggling with specific difficulties and forced to cope with impediments, like with their parents' divorce, sexual abuse, poverty and, most extremely, with war. However, it has been found that those

children do not break down under these difficulties, but develop competences and strategies of coping with such contexts of strain. Resilience research has substantially contributed to give answers to these questions. Pioneers in this field have concluded that these children possibly have good strategies at their disposal to reduce risks, cope with them sucessfully and to develop competences, to make the problem take a good turn. Thus, resilience research has been concerned with the question which competences children have to be taught to help them grow up resiliently. Joseph (1994) has developed a concept, which aims at promoting resilience in children. Masten & Coatsworth (1998) have recently published approaches for the development of competence in favourable and unfavourable environments with the subtitle "Lessons from Research on Successful Children". They illustrate how relevant systems, such as the attachment system (Carlson & Scroufe, 1995; Masten, 1994) or the system of self-regulation (Ciccheti & Tucker, 1994; Rothbart & Bates, 1998), which are decisive for the development of competence, can be strengthened by early educational approaches. They have summarized the characteristics leading to a resilient development and differentiate between individual, familial and extrafamilial characteristics. In the book just mentioned Joseph (1994) also shows ways how to promote certain competences in children, like for instance self-knowledge, empathy and the ability of taking the right decisions, and she also gives advice how to develop competences in educators to cope with children and their various and sometimes difficult characters.

In view of the European development it is a new challenge for parents to convey both cultural open-mindedness and lingual competences; learning two languages in addition to the mother tongue has already become an integral part of modern education. Last, but not least, Europe represents a new geographical, social, political and cultural reality, and the development and promotion of their children's ethnic and cultural identity is one of the biggest challenges for parents since World War II.

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